

A flawed argument reconstruction in political philosophy

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Abstract. There are some premise-by-premise reconstructions in political philosophy which are flawed, because they omit at least one premise or misword at least one premise. This paper focuses on a reconstruction by Richard Child. The original argument is by Andrea Sangiovanni and is about whether egalitarian values of distributive justice apply both within a state and globally. Child's reconstruction has been reproduced in a paper by Ian Davis, who approves of it. But I point out five logical problems with the reconstruction.

Introduction

A rational reconstruction of an argument presents that argument as a set of premises and a conclusion inferred from those premises. If a rational reconstruction is done correctly, then it often provides a quick way of presenting an argument. Another advantage of a rational reconstruction – or a pair of advantages, to be precise – concerns evaluating the argument. Faced with a rational reconstruction, we can ask, “If we suppose that the premises are true, does the conclusion follow?”¹ And we can also ask, “Are the premises true?”

Of course, we cannot pursue these questions properly if the reconstruction omits one of the premises or if the premises are erroneously formulated. I have found some reconstructions in recent political philosophy which suffer from one or both of these problems. In this paper, I focus on a single reconstruction. It is by Richard Child and comes from an article entitled “Global migratory potential and the scope of justice.” His reconstruction is reproduced in another

¹ Child writes of the conclusion “following” when the argument is sound rather than just valid. I am using the clause “If we suppose that the premises are true” to focus on validity.

paper, which approves of it (Davis n.d.: 4). However, I think there are some problems which this author has not noticed.

Child reconstructs an argument by Andrea Sangiovanni. He reconstructs the argument as five premises and a conclusion inferred from them:

- (1) Talented individuals do not deserve their place in the distribution of native endowments.
- (2) In the world as it is now, the stable conditions necessary for wealth creation through the exercise of talent are provided by the institutions that comprise modern states.
- (3) In a number of ways – for example, through taxation, through participation in various forms of political activity, and through simple compliance – citizens maintain the institutions that comprise modern states.
- (4) *The principle of reciprocity*: those who willingly contribute to the conditions necessary for the accumulation of benefits are owed a fair share of these benefits.
- (5) Only citizens, and not non-citizens, contribute to the conditions necessary for wealth creation in a particular state.

Therefore:

- (6) Only the distribution of goods between citizens (and not non-citizens) should be regulated by principles of justice.

Note that Child himself does not call the conclusion (6), rather he refers to it as (SC). Note also that Child uses the language of logic when presenting this argument. For example, when presenting (5), he writes, “The fifth and final premise of Sangiovanni’s argument is...” (2011: 288)

Problems

After reconstructing the argument, Child writes as if it has only one problem. He says, “*The problem* with this is that, even if we accept P1-P4, the statist conclusion does not follow, because P5* is false.” (2011: 288, my emphasis) But there are a number of other problems with the argument, as formulated by Child, even if we grant that all the premises are true.

I shall draw attention to five problems, which I have labelled “A” to “E.” Before presenting them, it will be useful to isolate the part of the argument that begins at (4):

(4) *The principle of reciprocity*: those who willingly contribute to the conditions necessary for the accumulation of benefits are owed a fair share of these benefits.

(5) Only citizens, and not non-citizens, contribute to the conditions necessary for wealth creation in a particular state.

Therefore:

(6) Only the distribution of goods between citizens (and not non-citizens) should be regulated by principles of justice.

As far as I can see, the conclusion is actually inferred from just these two premises, not all five, and it would have been clearer to remove the earlier premises. (Child would have to explain the justifications for these two and he could have introduced the propositions within the earlier premises when explaining.²) The problems I identify arise whether or not one makes this change, but here is an account of what is going on in the argument from (4) onwards, with various details omitted. The point of premise (4) is to specify a criterion for those who are owed a fair share of

² Premises (2) and (3), with slight alternations, justify part of the content of (5): that citizens contribute to the conditions necessary for wealth creation in a particular state. And it seems that (1) contributes to the justification of (4), because it contributes to denying special rights for the talented.

the benefits accumulated³ in a particular state. The criterion is meant to work like this: if you meet this criterion, you are owed a fair share; if you do not meet it, you are not. The point of premise (5) is to say that only citizens of this state meet the criterion and others do not. From these two premises, we arrive at the conclusion that only citizens of a particular state are owed a fair share of the benefits accumulated in this state; others are not. If the details are filled in appropriately, the premises would logically entail the conclusion. Should the premises be true, the conclusion would be as well. But I think the details have not been filled in appropriately. We are now ready to look into the five problems.

A. Let us begin by focusing on the principle of reciprocity stated in premise (4). The principle should actually be: *only* those who willingly contribute to the conditions necessary for the accumulation of benefits *in a particular state* are owed a fair share of these benefits. Child has omitted the “only” and the “in a particular state.” The problem I am referring to here is the omission of “only.” By omitting it, the conclusion does not follow, because the principle of reciprocity, as Child formulates it, asserts that those who willingly make certain contributions are owed a fair share of the benefits, but is neutral on the question of whether anyone else is owed a fair share.

B. Premise (5) also contains an omission. Premise (4) tells us what willing contributors are owed, whereas premise (5) refers to citizens who contribute, without specifying whether these contributions are willing or not. Premise (5) should be: only citizens of a particular state, and not non-citizens, *willingly* contribute to the conditions necessary *for the accumulation of benefits* in that state. Otherwise the conclusion cannot follow from the premises.

³ I find it more natural to write of providing, gaining or receiving benefits than accumulating them, except in some specific contexts where benefit has a technical meaning, such as in relation to pensions or employee contracts; but I adopt Child’s usage.

C. Apart from adding “willingly,” my proposed revision of (5) also replaces Child’s expression “for wealth creation” with “for the accumulation of benefits,” or else there is a question of to what extent premises (4) and (5) are referring to the same contribution and an extra premise would be needed to address this issue. (Is contributing to the conditions necessary for the accumulation of benefits always contributing to the conditions necessary for wealth creation?)

D. Child writes of being owed a fair share of benefits in premise (4), but of the distribution of goods in the conclusion. This gives rise to the question of whether goods and benefits are the same,⁴ or if not, what is the relationship between them. It is easy to reformulate the conclusion so that it does not give rise to this question, by writing of benefits throughout. Otherwise an extra premise is needed to answer the question.

E. I have pointed out the problems above as if the conclusion aims to say that citizens of a particular state are owed a fair share of the benefits accumulated in that state, while non-citizens are not. However, Child’s formulation of the conclusion, taken literally, does not deny that non-citizens are owed a fair share of the benefits/goods accumulated in a particular state. Look at what the conclusion says literally: “Only the distribution of goods between citizens (and not non-citizens) should be regulated by principles of justice.” This does not deny that non-citizens are owed a fair share; it merely denies that any distribution they get should be *regulated by principles* of justice. His formulation seems consistent with the view that although both citizens of a particular state and non-citizens are owed a fair share of the goods accumulated in that state, there are only principles for determining what is a fair share when the focus is on citizens. Here is an elaboration of this view: any attempt to identify principles which determine

⁴ I wonder whether in political philosophy we can be open to the possibility of a good which gives no benefit to anyone and only has value in itself. (Even the description of a good as giving a benefit implies a distinction between the good and the benefit given.)

what would be a fair share for non-citizens fails. Since there are no adequate principles to guide us, when a state has accumulated goods we have to use our intuition to determine what would be a fair share for those who are not citizens of it. (To adapt a label of Robert Nozick's, "intuitionism for non-citizens, principles for citizens."⁵) But Child clearly means for the conclusion to deny that non-citizens are owed a fair share of the goods accumulated in a state (2011: 290), hence it needs reformulation.

Conclusion

Putting the revisions proposed in the section above together, we arrive at the following argument, with premise (4) shifted to (1) and the main revisions underlined⁶:

- (1) Only those who willingly contribute to the conditions necessary for the accumulation of benefits in a particular state are owed a fair share of these benefits.
- (2) Only citizens of a particular state, and not non-citizens, willingly contribute to the conditions necessary for the accumulation of benefits in that state.

Therefore:

- (3) Only citizens of a particular state, and not non-citizens, are owed a fair share of the benefits accumulated in that state.

How many of the problems with Child's reconstructed argument belong to the reconstruction, rather than the original argument? Let us assume that Child is at least "in the

⁵ Nozick uses the label "utilitarianism for animals, Kantianism for people," but it is just the form of this label which I am taking here – "approach 1 for Xs, approach 2 for Ys" – not the content. Given the current literature, "particularism" may be a better choice of term than "intuitionism." (see Dancy 2013)

⁶ This argument could probably do with a specification of whether "citizens of a particular state" means all citizens of a particular state or all citizens of a particular state above age X or something else. Non-citizens means everyone outside of the specified group. The main non-citizens of interest for Child are citizens of other states.

right ballpark” with his interpretation of the original.⁷ Nevertheless, I cannot see any reason for attributing to Sangiovanni an argument which contains the five logical errors that Child’s reconstruction attributes to him. Despite this, there is probably much value in Child’s paper and also the other paper which uses the reconstruction, both of which have interesting counterexamples.

References

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⁷ To capture Sangiovanni’s thinking more accurately, I think it is better to replace “fair” with “egalitarian.” He thinks that there are some requirements of justice at a global level, to help human beings reach a minimal threshold, so he could say that there is fairness and unfairness at this level as well (see 2007: 4).